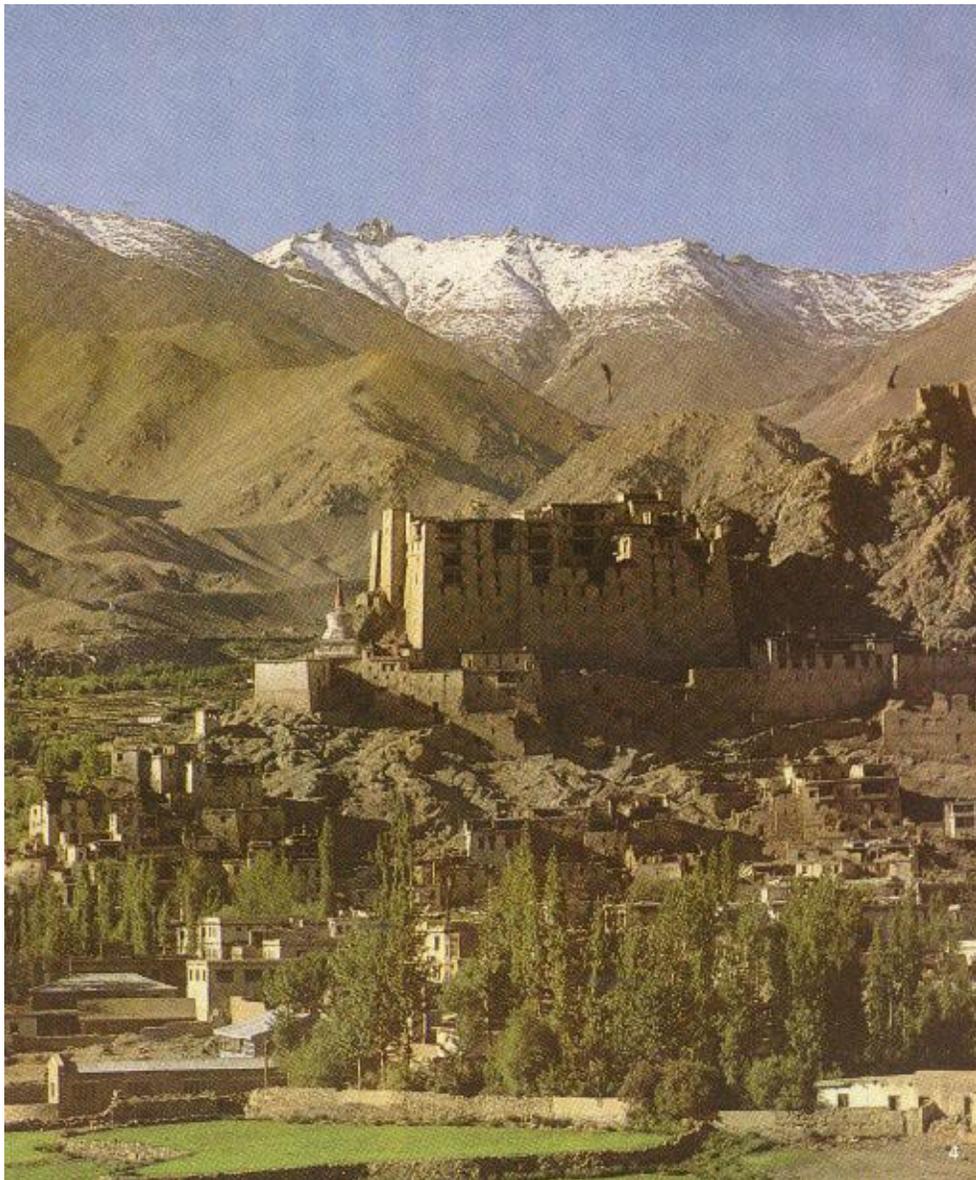




# Ladakh

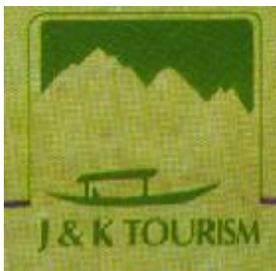




# Ladakh

## THE LAND OF ROCK

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## 1.0 LADAKH – THE LAND OF ROCK



Ladakh - the land of many passes

The Srinagar-Leh road, skirting the banks of the Drass river reveals a canvas full of colours, painting a soulful harmony. It composes a moment when Nature is in creation.

Once past the Zoji-La (pass), the change is dramatic and stark. The green valley suddenly becomes barren and awesome. The air gets brisker, the sun warmer. And before you is a gigantic sculpture in desolate rock, silencing the mind and compelling the imagination to stand back and gaze in awe at this vast expanse of solitude.

Now you are a little closer to the skies. The once forbidden land of Ladakh unfolds itself. An amazing land, top of the world.

The small villages, with towering edifices of granite and gravel mountains encompassing them, look frail and inconsequential. This is Ladakh - the land of rock.

Ladakh - the land of many passes, of freezing high barren landscapes lying across the lofty Asian tableland - is among the highest of the world's inhabited plateaus. Remote yet never isolated, this trans Himalayan land is a repository of a myriad cultural and religious influences from mainland India, Tibet and Central Asia.

Situated on the western end of the Himalayas, Ladakh has four major mountain ranges - the Great Himalayan, Zaskar, Ladakh and the Karakoram - passing through it. A maze of enormously high snow capped peaks and the largest glaciers outside the polar region, dominate the terrain where valley heights range from a mere 8,000 feet to 15,000 feet while passes of up to 20,000 feet and peaks reaching above 25,000 feet can be seen all around. The world's largest glacier outside the polar region, Siachen is here. Such daunting heights no wonder determine the land's temperature where Leh and Kargil experience temperatures as low as - 30° C and Dras -50°C. Three months of sub zero temperatures (Dec-Feb) and the, rest of the months facing zero degree temperatures, it is a long and hard winter here. Waterways, waterfalls and lakes freeze, and the water vapour freezes to break into the most intricate and attractive crystal patterns. But on clear sunny days, when the average temperature goes over 20° C, the sun can be scorching hot in its intensity and its ultra violet rays cause deep sun burn. Rainfall is a mere 2 inches and it is the melting snow in summer which sustains life in this arctic zone. High aridity and low temperatures lead to sparse vegetation as a result of which the landscape is desert-like with sand dunes and even occasional sand storms occur.

The major waterway of Ladakh is the Indus which enters India from Tibet at Demchok. Starting near Mt. Kailash, the Indus, according to mythology, sprouts from the mouth of a lion, and is therefore known as Sengge Chhu. Sengge (Sinh in Sanskrit) means lion and Chhu is Tibetan for a flowing water body. As it flows down, Sengge Chhu is joined by its other tributaries, the Zaskar, the Shingo and the Shyok, and these river valleys form the main area of human habitation.

Ladakh also has one of the largest and most beautiful natural lakes in the country. Pangong Tso, 150 km long and 4 km wide, is nearly an inland sea at a height of 14,000 feet, with intensely clear water of an incredible range of hues of blue. Having no outlet the water in the lake is highly brackish and the lake's basin houses a large wealth of minerals deposited by the melting snows every year. Tso Moriri, a pearl shaped lake, and Tso Kar, both contain large mineral deposits. Among the fresh water lakes Yaye Tso, Kiun Tso and Amtitla offer great scenic attraction.

Ladakh, though a remote border land with virtually no surface communication for more than six months a year, has surprisingly never been isolated. Continuous cultural and commercial contact existed with the surrounding regions of Tibet, Himachal, Kashmir, Central Asia and Sinkiang. This interaction helped maintain trade ties between the places. Pashm, salt, borax, sulphur, spices, brocade, pearls, metals, carpets, tea and apricots were the merchandise exchanged in their marts.

Covering an area of approximately 98,000 sq km, Ladakh has a sparse population of about 1,35,000. All habitations are situated along water courses, where long distances are traversed by using animal transportation of mainly the yak and the pony, the broad backed hunia sheep and the Bactrian two-humped camel. Ethnically, the Ladakhis comprise an amalgam of four prominent strains, namely the Mons, Dards, Tibetans and Baltis. Mons belong to the Aryan race. They might be called professional entertainers, as they move from place to place playing their musical instruments and for the most part are denied the privilege of inter-marriage with the other groups. Dards are confined mainly to Dras and the Indus Valley. At Dras, they are Muslims and retain very little of their past. But those in the Indus valley below Khalsi display a distinctive identity, preserving their original Buddhist religion as well as their cultural entity.

The Tibetans are the dominant racial strain in eastern and central Ladakh, but over the years have merged with other groups to form a homogeneous Ladakhi entity. Two ethnically and culturally distinctive groups are the Tibetans proper living at Choglamsar and the nomadic Changpas with their herds of pashm bearing goats in the eastern plains.

Baltis are mainly found in western Ladakh in the Kargil region, but isolated pockets exist in the Nubra valley and near Leh. They are believed to be descendants of the Sakas, a Central Asian race.

All groups have together contributed their own perceptible share in the distinctive physiognomy, language and homogenised culture of Ladakh. The Ladakhis are a simple and hardy people with an immense capacity for work and the fortitude to not merely survive but remain cheerful under the most adverse physical conditions. Living as close to nature as they do, they have maintained a harmonious balance with their surroundings.

## 2.0 ECONOMY

Livestock is one of the mainstays of Ladakh's domestic economy, with the yak and the goat being the two most important animals. Yaks are shaggy, short-statured, sturdy and sure footed animals of prodigious strength, capable of negotiating the steepest of slopes, narrow frozen tracks and the coldest of climes. Feeding on the snow and on small shrubs in the craggy terrain, they yield milk for butter, hair for ropes and tents, hide for boots, aprons and baskets, horns for agricultural implements, dung for fuel and meat for sustenance, thereby becoming the most important animal in the arctic zone. The goats of the eastern region of Chang Thang have extremely fine, long staple fleece, pashm famed for its end product of pashmina shawls. Its other products too help in the sustenance of daily life. Zanskari ponies are famous for their speed, strength and stamina and, therefore, make excellent vehicles of transport and are unequalled for the sport of Ladakhi polo.



Pashmina goat

### 3.0 RECREATION

Archery is a popular form of relaxation and contests are held at every festival and at social gatherings. These are gala affairs with much music, dancing, drinking and gaiety. But polo is the most exciting sport. Ladakhi polo is a fast and furious game of two rounds of 20 minutes each with few restraints and rough riding reminiscent of the Mongol horsemen. During winter, frozen water surfaces provide the ideal rink for ice skating. Discarded tins are flattened and attached to the soles of the shoes, serving a substitute for skates. Ice hockey, too, has become a popular winter sport.



The popular sport of archery

## 4.0 WILDLIFE

Lying at the confluence of three zoogeographic realms, Palearctic, Oriental and Malayan, Ladakh's ecosystem is possibly the most unique and by far the most fascinating in the world. With its barren plateaus and uplands, Ladakh has a distinct alpine, floral and faunal variety. Several flowering plants, a dozen important mammals and over a hundred species of birds are found here in this rugged terrain. Most of the species are classified as endangered or rare.



A water-bird of Ladakh

The wild yak is to be found only here. Other animals include the ibex, blue sheep, bharal, docile marmot and mouse hare. Black necked crane, bar-headed geese, ducks and several other water birds breed near the lakes in thousands. The avid bird watcher can spend fruitful hours by observing Bactrian magpies, grey tits, chough, raven, sparrow, kite, kestrel, Turkoman rock pigeon, chukor, finches, buntings, larks, desert wheateaters, a many more varieties of birds.

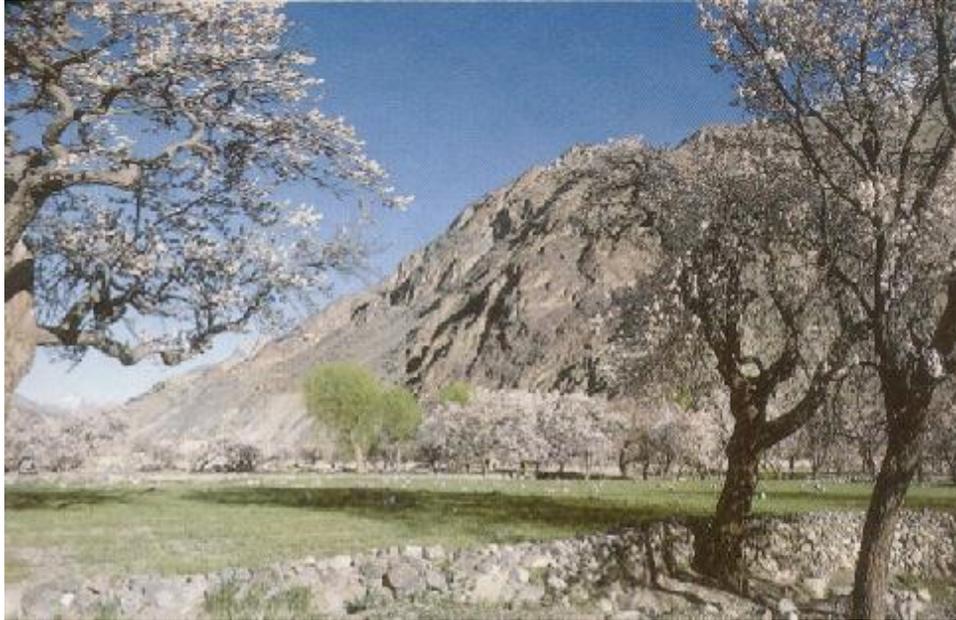
The snow leopard is Ladakh's most rare animal. Another one that is unique is the kyang or the wild horse, while at lower altitudes the musk deer too is a rare sight, precious by virtue of its expensive musk. Visitors are likely to spot many marmots, mouse hares, stone martens, red foxes, wolves, ibex, bharal and shapu during the course of their journey but the habitat of the nyan (big horned sheep), chim (Tibetan antelope famed for its fleece-Shahtoosh), goa (Tibetan gazelle), lynx, pallas cat, kyamg (wild horse) and brong dong (wild yak) are still outside the tourists' domain.



The wild horse is unique to Ladakh

## 5.0 VEGETATION

During the short intense summers, cultivation is sustained by melting snows and a careful harnessing of water is essential. Ladakhis, particularly the Baltis, are expert irrigation engineers and construct long channels cutting along the granite mountains and gravel slopes. Water is thus channeled to raise food grains like barley (which is roasted and ground to become Tsampa, and is eaten with salted butter tea called gur-gur), apple trees at heights of 10,000 feet and apricots (chuli) which are grown up to 14,000 feet. Apricots are useful since they can be preserved by drying for later consumption. The kernel yields oil, useful both for its application and burning votive lamps. Mulberry, walnut and grape are grown at lower heights.



Apricot blossoms in spring

The main trees are the willow and poplar and they meet the requirement for fuel and timber. Easy to grow and maintain, they provide a good yield of fodder for the animals and twigs for baskets. Fragrant juniper (Shukpa) grows everywhere, and is used for ceremonial and religious purposes.

In late October in Ladakh the valleys are a visual delight - apricots and poplars provide a spectacular display of green, gold and rust; the greys and chocolate browns of the mountains vie with the turquoise blue waters and azure blue skies to provide a resplendent panorama of Ladakh in autumn. At such a time, one marvels at the green of the summer crops and fruit blossoms which so spring up in a barren brown landscape, toasting a tribute to nature's miracles.

## 6.0 RELIGION

Travelling monks and scholars ensured that the land never lacked in its cultural and religious dimensions. The Vajrayana sect of Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant form of the religion, with a mixture of the animistic Bon faith and ancient Hindu tantric practices. Both Central and Eastern Ladakh are predominantly Buddhist while Western Ladakh is mainly Shia Muslim. Ruling Muslim priests are known as Aghas who combine the secular and religious functions in their hereditary duties. The mosques and Imambaras here are attractive examples of Iranian and Saracenic architecture, but due to the strong Islamic injunction against any form of gaiety and celebration in all aspects of life, western Ladakh is sombre and subdued, though not lacking in any of the deeper human qualities.

### GOMPAS

The most attractive feature of the landscape of Ladakh are the Buddhist highest point of the mountain spurs or majestically sprawling over cliffsides, located in the vicinity of villages, these aesthetically pleasing, architecturally interesting gompas provide the focus for the faith of the highly religious Buddhist people. Gompas are places of worship, isolated meditation and religious instruction for the young. Many gompas celebrate their annual festivals in winter which are marked by gay mask dances.

Gompas have a wealth of artefacts. Lamayuru, the oldest religious centre of Ladakh, beats all others in sheer grandeur. In its uniqueness of wood carving, statues and frescoes, Alchi offers the highest rewards. The wealth of its possessions and its annual summer festival make Hemis the most popular while Thikse rates high in terms of architectural impact and the beauty of its Buddha statue. The grace and beauty of the festival performances at Likir and Phyang with their proximity to Leh are great attractions in their favour while the accessibility of the Shey, Spituk and the Sankar gompas make them suitable for visitors with time at a premium.

The approach to the gompas is lined with mane walls and chortens. Mane walls are made of votive stones on which prayers and holy figures are inscribed, while chortens are semi religious shrines or reliquaries, containing relics of holy people in scriptures.

The outer walls and entrances of gompas are lined with cylinders of wood or metal mounted vertically on spindles and placed in alcoves, which are rotated for prayers. These cylinders contain hundreds of slips of paper containing invocations and each revolution adds that many prayers to the devout's religious merit. Small individual wheels as well as larger ones perform a similar function.

Beautiful paintings of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Dishapals, Dharmchakras and Mandals adorn the walls and the inner chambers of the gompas. Scroll paintings on silk or brocade (called thankas) also decorate the interiors. There is a bright display of colour in the prayer flags and bunting draped in the interior of the gompas. Hand printed, loose leaf scriptures are reverently wrapped in rich silk and brocade, some with golden calligraphy.

All gompas have large courtyards where public performances of dance dramas and mask dances during religious festivities take place. Monks wear brightly coloured costumes and precious masks. Religious objects, of Bon, Buddhism and Tantra are used during these dances to enact tales from the scriptures.

Dances are heralded by long booming trumpets and the crescendo beats of drums. Young acolytes bearing the front ends of trumpets are followed by monks and performers. Comic interludes intersperse the solemn performances. The dances are mostly slow twirls and intricate footwork with all occasional fast tempo and fierce lunges to liven the atmosphere. The victory of good over evil forms the basic theme of these dances. Some festivals involve trancelike stages when monks inflict self injury and act as oracles, making forecasts and answering individual queries. During the festivals at Lamayuru and Mashro, the ritual of slaving a human form made of tsampa, signifies the destruction of baser characteristics like lust, greed and anger.

The Kushak, or the high priest, sits in the courtyard, with reamed monks reciting the scriptures whilst other monks play drums, cymbals and trumpets as accompaniment to the dances. Novices and initiates periodically serve hot buttered tea and tsampa.

Many major festivals occur in mid winter providing a welcome break from the enforced inactivity of the harsh climate. Thousands throng the gompas in their colourful best to participate in the festivities. At such times impromptu markets spring up all around.



The Avalokitesvara with a thousand hands, Lamayuru monastery

### **MONASTERIES**

Spiritual life in Ladakh centres around monasteries, which served traders and travellers of yore as a place to stay. Each monastery is a conspicuous high building. The path leading to it is usually lined with prayer cylinders called chhoskor which are made of metal and filled with prayer scrolls and charms. Before entering the monastery a devotee sets the cylinder in motion with a gentle stroke, in the belief that he is sending to heaven prayers equal to the number in the cylinder, multiplied by the number of rotations.

#### **Alchi Gompas**

These two monasteries are to be found near Saspol on the Srinagar-Leh road. They house a number of gigantic clay statues of the Buddha in various forms. The primary attraction of these monasteries is, however, their 1000-year old wall paintings. 70 km from Leh, on the banks of the Indus, is the Alchi Gumpa dating a thousand years back. One of its walls features thousands of miniature-sized pictures of the Buddha. Three large sized images made of clay and painted brightly are its focal attraction. No longer an active religious centre, it is looked after by monks from the Likir monastery.

#### **Likir Gompas**

Founded in the 11th century AD and rededicated to a different monastic order in the 15th century AD, its earlier gumpa was destroyed in a fire. The present gumpa dates back to the 18th century. Skilled craftsmen producing excellent thankas, earthen pots and carved folding wooden stools, live here in the village. Majestically situated, Likir commands a spectacular view. A magnificent giant juniper tree, one of the few survivors of its species, stand in the courtyard.

### **Namgyal Tsemo Gompa**

No longer inhabited, this gompa was built by King Tashi Namgyal. It forms a part of the Leh palace complex and is maintained by monks from the Sankar Gompa.

### **Sankar Gompa**

Just 3 km from Leh, this monastery has a formidable collection of miniature statues of pure gold and a number of exciting paintings. It receives electricity and may, therefore, be visited in the evening as well. A relatively modern monastery, it is closely associated with the Spitak monastery and serves as the residence of the head priest - Kushak Bakula.

### **Spitak Gompa**

8 km from Leh, it stands prominently on the top of a hillock commanding a panoramic view of the Indus valley for miles. Many icons of Buddha and fine thankas are to be found in this 15th century gompa. The gompa also houses a collection of ancient masks, antique arms, and an awe inspiring image of Mahakal. The face of the Kali image is kept covered and is revealed only at the annual function in January.

### **Phyang Gompa**

17 km from Leh on the Leh-Kargil road, it looks like a huge palace from afar, built by Tashi Namgyal in the later half of the 16th century AD, it belongs to the Red Cap sect of Buddhists. Hundreds of icons of Buddha and other gods are kept on wooden shelves.

### **Shey Palace and Gompa**

Also on the way to Hemis gompa and 15 km from Leh, is the summer palace of the erstwhile Raja of Leh. Set upon a hill, and housing the largest golden topped victory stupa, the monastery has a two-storeyed statue of the sitting Buddha in copper and gold which leaves one breathless. Since the monastery is exclusive, it is preferable to make arrangements with the lama before visiting it.

### **Thiksey Gompa**

En route to Hemis gompa, the Thiksey monastery provides a panoramic view of the green Indus Valley from its vantage point atop a hill. It has chambers full of statues, stupas and thankas. There are 100 resident lanes and, allegedly, a nunnery. The Thiksey festival is now held in early autumn every year. 19 km from Leh spectacularly sited, Thikse is one of the largest and architecturally most impressive gompas. There are several temples in this gompa containing images, stupas and wall paintings of Buddha which are exquisite.

### **Hemis Gompa**

Ladakh's biggest monastery, Hemis gompa is 49 km from Leh on the Leh-Manali road. Its popularity stems from the major annual festival held here in summer. The festival is in honour of Guru Padma Sambhav's birth anniversary. It also has the largest thanka in Ladakh which is unfurled once in 12 years .

Hemis was built in 1630 during the reign of Sengge Namgyal, an illustrious ruler of Ladakh. It flourished under the Namgyal dynasty for the royalty favoured the Drugkpa Sect which managed the monastery. It is divided into two, the Assembly Hall on the right and the main temple on the left. The Hall, Dukhang, is also used as a 'green room' by the dancers during the festival. The temple is known as Tshogkhang. The verandahs have a surfeit of frescoes, among them the Buddhist 'Wheel of life' (Kalachakra) and the 'Lords of the Four Quarters,' besides rows of prayer wheels.

### **Chemrey Gompa**

45 km from Leh, situated in a picturesque valley leading to Changla, this gompa was constructed as a funeral act of merit on Sengge Namgyal's death in 1645. A large collection of scriptures with title pages in sterling silver and the text in gold letters is kept here. Close by is a cave monastery reputed to have been the abode of Padma Sambhav during one of his periods of meditation.

### **Stakna Gompa**

A few kilometres upstream from Thikse, Stakna is situated on a 60 metre high isolated rock.

### **Mashro Gompa**

Situated on the opposite bank of the Indus across Thikse, Mashro was established in the first half of the 16th century AD and has a valuable collection of very old and beautiful thankas, some in the form of 'mandalas'. Its annual festival of oracles in early March is an important event in the Ladakhi religious calendar. Young monks selected as oracles undergo long periods of meditation, fasting and ritual purification to gain spiritual strength. When possessed they perform astonishing feats with swords and knives, cavorting blindfolded along narrow parapets.

### **Stok Gompa**

The palace of the banished royal family, Stok has a museum which displays fabulous period costumes and jewellery of the royalty along with exquisite thankas representing the life of Sakya Muni. Interesting historical objects like coins, seals, armour, weapons, precious jade and porcelain too can be seen here.

### **Basgo Gompa**

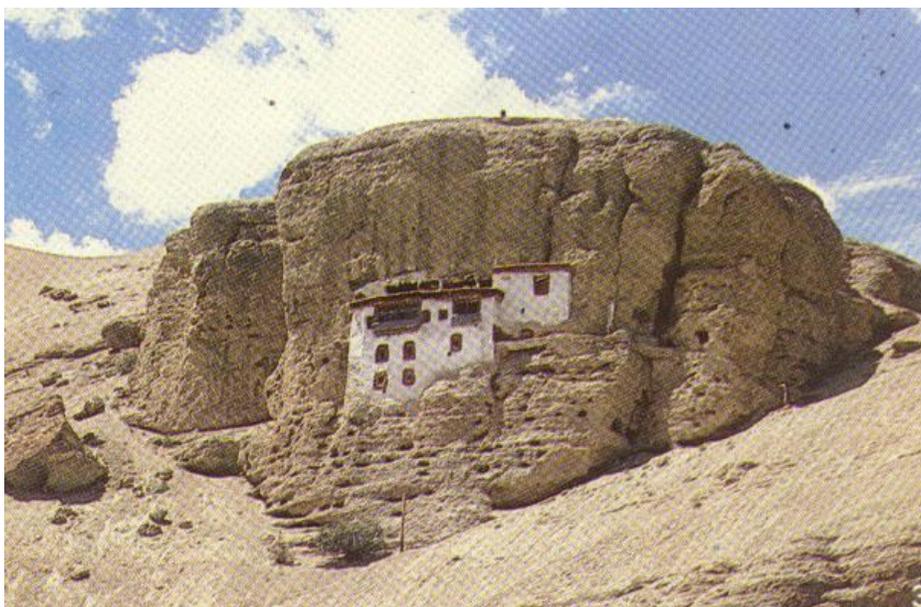
40 km downstream from Leh, it was the seat of power of a branch of the Namgyal family. It was here in 1680 AD that invading Mongol and Tibetan armies were held in check over a three year long siege. Original 16th century murals and other arts at Basgo are well worth a visit.

### **Lamayuru Gompa**

On crossing Foto-La, the highest point on the Srinagar-Leh road, if you take a winding road that descends into the Indus Valley, a sudden bend reveals a strange village with a monastery overlooking it. Lamayuru has fascinating caves carved out of the mountainside. Its festival is held during summer. The oldest holy site Ladakh, it was a Bon shrine prior to the advent of Buddhism. Also known as Yung Drung (Swastika) it is sited on a high promontory overlooking the village and valley. For sheer spectacle value no other gompa can match Lamayuru.

### **Mulbekh Gompa**

The village of Mulbekh, on the way to Namika-La, has a unique sight a huge image of the Buddha carved out of rock bang on the road. The monastery here is perched on a high rock over the village and the valley, and has some prized relics.



The cave monastery of Shergole

## 7.0 FESTIVALS GALORE

Apart from being the spiritual hub of all social activities, the monasteries are also the centres of Ladakh's cultural. The religious fervour of the people finds expression in the annual festivals celebrated here. These generally follow the lunar calendar and therefore their dates vary from year to year. One of the festivals which is famous and celebrated with zest is the Hemis festival. Hemis is the biggest monastery of Ladakh and the spiritual centre of Buddhists. People from all over Ladakh come to attend this two day long festival. The festival is preceded by seven days of prayers by the monks in the monastery. The most impressive part of the festival is the famous mask dance which lamas of the monastery perform continuously for two days. The masks represent various gods and demons. The whole festival signifies the triumph of good over evil. The day marks the birthday of Guru Padmasambhava, the founder of the red sect.



Lamas wearing terrifying masks at the Lamayuru festival

**Festival Calendar**

<i>Leh Gompa</i>	End January-early February
<i>Stok Gompa</i>	Early-mid February
<i>Matho Gompa</i>	End February-early March
<i>Lamayuru Gompa</i>	End April-early May
<i>Hemis Gompa</i>	End June-early July
<i>Phyang Gompa</i>	Early to end July
<i>Thikse Gompa</i>	Mid July to early August
<i>Spitak Gompa</i>	Early to mid January
<i>Festival of Ladakh</i>	1st week of August

Note: The dates of festivals are based on the lunar calendar. Therefore they vary in relation to the Gregorian calendar from year to year.

## 8.0 DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

Goncha, a voluminous robe of thick woollen cloth with a colourful cummerbund tied at the waist, is the



Ladakhi men and women in their traditional finery



Bejewelled girl

most common Ladakhi dress; loose pyjamas, a top hat and long felt boots complete the ensemble. Slight dress variations exist for men and women. Buddhists mainly wear brick red robes but the nomads of Chang Thang and the Kargil Muslims wear undyed clothes with the latter also using the round knitted Balti cap with a rolled brim. Ladakhi women wear an attractive headgear called perak, made of black lamb skin studded with semi precious turquoise stones, covering the head like a cobra's hood and tapering to a thin tail reaching down the back. For ceremonial purposes, colourful robes in silk and brocade are worn.

## 9.0 THE ROAD JOURNEY

The road journey from Srinagar to Leh takes two days to cover the 434 km distance with an overnight halt at Kargil. Traversing the most fabulous terrain of incredible heights and scenic mountain beauty, driving along the high mountain roads is the most advisable way to travel to Ladakh. While an Indian Airlines Boeing completes the trip in a mere 35 minutes, a road journey enhances a traveller's experience by giving him ample time to acclimatise to the unique climate of a plateau two miles high in the sky. It would be advisable to travel in a jeep or car/taxi which gives greater freedom to stop enroute at places of interest.

From Sonamarg in Kashmir, the road climbs towards Zojila, some 25 km away at a height of 11,500 feet. Zojila is historically of great interest since tanks for a major battle were used here at such a height for the first time, in 1948. The pass at Zojila marks dramatically the boundary line between Kashmir and Ladakh. Dense green forest clad slopes give way to bare, multi-coloured mountains of stark beauty. Even the air is colder, dryer and purer through perceptibly lower in oxygen content. The intensity of light doubles while the sky becomes an incredible blue.

From Zojila the road descends to the flowering meadow of Minamarg a botanist's paradise, abounding in a wealth of exotic alpine flora. Matyan, on the other end of the meadow, leads to Dras, where temperatures drop to below minus 50°C. Enormous snowfalls and severe winds during winters completely immobilise its inhabitants. Ethnically a Dard settlement, the populace practices Islam.

Along the Dras river, passing Kaksar, one moves towards Kargil, the journey showing remarkable evidence of indigenous engineering - water channels cut deep into the granite slopes, rising terraces of carefully nurtured soil preciously preserved between vertical walls of rocks and boulders, several plantations and green fields at Channi Gund and Kirkit Chu with groves of poplar, willow, apple and apricot orchards, barley and buckwheat fields, all lending an air of serenity to the area.

Situated on the bank of river Suru at a height of 9,000 feet, midway between Srinagar and Leh, Kargil provides an overnight stop. The second largest town, it is an important junction of the historic routes leading to Kashmir, Baltistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Sinkiang, Tibet and via Zaskar to Jammu and Himachal. It was and continues to be an important trade and tourism centre. All treks to Zaskar, Himachal, Jammu and the Indus valley, as well as mountaineering expeditions to Nun and Kun (twin peaks at a height of over 7,000 metres) begin from Kargil.

Climatically, Kargil enjoys a distinct advantage over the rest of Ladakh. Food, fruits, fuel and timber are more easily available with two crops being harvested every year.

Kargil retains the characteristics of a medieval town with narrow alleys cobbled streets and curios right out of the Arabian Nights. A predominantly Balti Shia Muslim settlement, the two mosques here are superb examples of Turkish architecture.

Zaskar - Passing up the Suru valley through Pensi La (which is open for 3-4 months: July-October), one arrives in Zaskar. Twice a week bus services link Kargil with Padam in Zaskar. For the price of a bus ticket one can also take a ride on cargo trucks on other days. Over Pensi La is the 5,000 sq km vast expanse of concentrated mountains and long valleys of Zaskar, an ancient kingdom with a better preserved cultural entity. Primarily Buddhist, Padam is a sub-district headquarters with several accessible monasteries and 8th century rock edicts with significant carvings and inscriptions. Other places of interest in Zaskar are Karsha with its large and wealthy monastery and Zangla. Treks commence from here for Lamayuru and Hemis. Nothing can beat the excitement of a walk down the rope suspension bridge at Zangla, while Phugtal and Zongkhul are two famous cave monasteries in Zaskar. To savour a typical experience of western Ladakh, a trip to Sanku, Panikhar and Parkachik is a must.

Leaving Kargil, crossing the Suru river, one climbs a high, flat plateau to descend to Pashkyum, a verdant meadow and wealthy village in the Wakha Rong valley. From here the next important habitation is the fertile valley at Mulbekh with its high monastery perched on a rock. From Wakha a 13,000 feet climb to Namik La (pillar in the sky) begins. A beautiful chocolate brown landscape of rounded hills and snow sculpted rocks gives way to the Budhkhharbu valley leading to Photu La, another 13,000 feet high pass. A tantalising glimpse of the mysterious monastery of Lamayuru, set amidst the grandest mountain scape of

a drained lake invites the traveller to examine it closely. Resuming the journey, the traveller descends to the Indus valley at Khalsi over a series of long loops. Here one can see the fantastic panorama of the Ladakh range: grey to chocolate, yellow to russet, and brown to green, all a vivid contrast of highs and lows.

Downstream from Khalsi is the road to Batalik through the Drogpa area of Hanu, Garkhun Da, Da Hanu and Darchick. Upriver from Khalsi, the road travels along the river Indus right up to Leh. Saspol, with its caves, and the Alchi monastery, lead the way to the Likir monastery, finally descending to the fortress of Basgo, the Chargyal Thang plain with its enormously large chortens, mane walls and the village of Nimu.

From Nimu, the road again climbs to yet another bare plateau, where you get the first glimpse of Leh, 30 km away. 15 km short of Leh is Phyang and then comes the Spituk monastery from where the Tsemo Namgyal peak, the fort, palace and gumpa can be seen clearly, presiding over Leh, guarding the route to Khardungla and dominating the Indus valley. You arrive at last, at the most exciting destination, to view a millenia old civilization, the culmination of the mingling of the culture, religion and commerce of high Asia.

Leh - amidst starkly beautiful and majestic mountains, gradually merging into an oasis of green fields, Leh is situated, on the banks of the Indus, at a height of 11,000 feet. For seven months a year, Leh airport is Ladakh's only link with the outside world.

Transport, tour operators, boarding and lodging facilities are available to suit every pocket and there is sufficient novelty, antiquity, hospitality and bargains to satisfy the quest of all types of visitors.

With a population of 10,000 people, mainly Buddhist, some Argoos (Muslim descendants of Yarkandi traders) and a small Christian community, Leh bears the distinct stamp of its history as the administrative, commercial and cultural capital of Ladakh. A memorable sight of the Leh bazar is the group of women, traditionally attired, selling fruits, vegetables and household articles spinning and knitting, and exchanging gentle banter between themselves and with passersby.

The mosque, city palace, the bazar and the gompas are all within walking distance. Shey, Spituk and Phyang are quite close while Stok, Mashro, Thikse, Stakna, Chenlrey, Hemis, Likir, Basgo and Alchi are all a day's touring distance with regular bus and taxi services plying daily. Rumbak and Markha offer exciting treks, while Stok Kangri is the best for a climb. Boating and river running too is possible on the Indus.

### **Trekking in Ladakh**

Ladakh is a trekking country offering a variety of trekking routes amidst landscapes of breathtaking beauty. Some important treks are:

#### **Padum Lamayuru Trek**

Padum - Pishu - Hanamur - Snertse - Lingshet Singey La - Photaksar - Sirsir La--- Hanupata Phanjila-- Wanla Prinkiti---- La Lamayuru.

#### **Leh - Lamayuru - Saspol Trek**

Leh-- Lamayuru-- Prinkiti La-- Wanla Urtsi- Phanjila Tarla- Mangyu - Gyara Alchi - Saspol.

#### **Leh - Markha Valley Trek**

Leh - Martselang - Chogdo - Nimaling Kongmaru La - Hankar - Markha - Skiu Kaya Rumbak via Kandala.

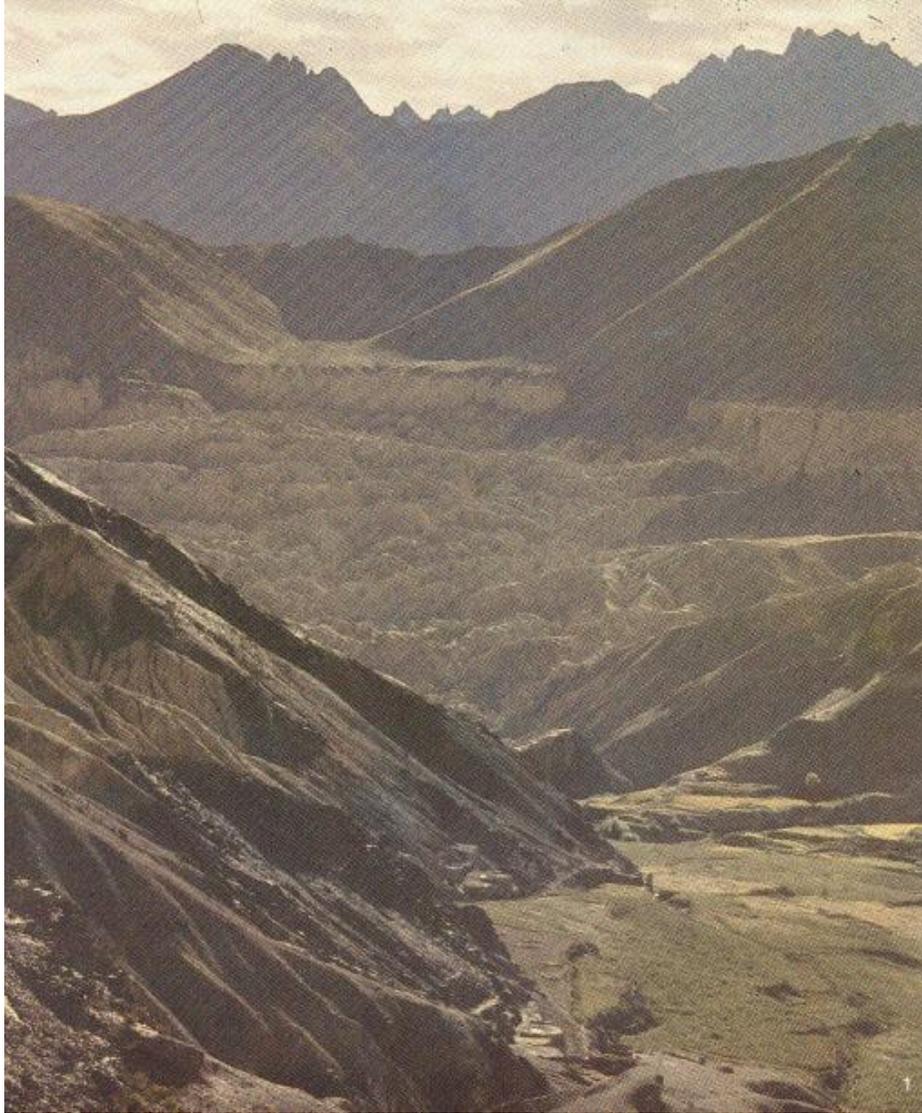
#### **Padum - Darcha (Manali) Trek**

Padum - Barden - Raru - Surley - Cha- Phugtel--Purney--Dranqza - Kargiakh - Lartsa - Shingkun La - Gadi Shisa - Darcha.

Padam to Raru, 22 km; Raru to Cha 23 km; Cha to Tasta 25 km; Tasta to Kargiah, 26 km; Kargiah to Lakhang Pulu, 24 km; Lakhang Pulu to Zanskar Sumdo (via Shingkula 5,100 metres), 25 km, Zanskar Sumdo to Darcha Sumdo, 25 km.

#### **Pahalgam - Panikhar - Kargil Trek**

Pahalgam - Chandanwari (by bus) - Wavjan - Rangmarg - Humpet - Kanital - Lonvilad Gali - Base of Lonvilad Gali - Chelong Nallah - Panikhar - Kargil (by bus).



Trekking terrain near Lamayuru monastery

**The Markha Valley Trek**

Spituk to Zingchen, 12 km; Zingchen to Yurutse, 13 km; Yurutse to Sku (via Kandala 4,800 metres), 14 km; Sku to Markha, 12 km; Markha to Hankar, 11 km; Hankar to Nimaling, 10 km; Nimaling to Shang Sumdo (via Kongmarula 5,030 metres), 14 km; Shang Sumdo to Martselang, 10 km; Martselang to Hemis, 6 km.

**The Padam-Kishtwar Trek**

Padam to Tungri, 12 km; Tungri to Ating, 12 km; Ating to Huttra, 24 km; Huttra to Buswas, 17 km; Buswas to Machail, 27 km; Galar to Kishtwar, 32 km.

**The Lamayuru-Spadum Trek**

Lamayuru to Fanjila, 24 km; Fanjila to Hanupata, 23 km; Hanupata to Photoksar 20 km; Photoksar to Base of Singila, 18 km; Base of Singila to Skumpata (via Singila 5,000 metres), 19 km; Skumpata to Lingshet, 9 km; Lingshet to Omangschu (via Hanumala 4,700 metres), 28 km; Omangschu to Pido (Parpela 4,700 metres), 18 km; Pidmo to Rinam, 17 km; Rinam to Spadum, 16 km.

### The Likir-Nurla Trek

Main Road to Likir Gompa, 5 km; Likir Gompa to Yangthang, 9 km; Yangthang to Hemis Sukpachen, 10 km; Hemis Sukpachen to Temisgam, 11 km; Temisgam to Nurla, 8 km.

### Trekking in Zanskar and Kargil

One of the major attractions of Ladakh in general and Kargil in particular is the scope they offer for trekking. The Suru and Zanskar valleys, due to their location along the Greater Himalayan range offer the most exciting routes involving as they do crossing this nature barrier through narrow passes and depressions. Zanskar, in particular, is a challenging area where even a casual excursion to one of the monasteries can be a rewarding trek. Four popular treks of this region intersect at Padum. Similarly, Panikhar, in Suru valley, is the nodal point for a two-week long trans -Himalayan trek from Kashmir into Ladakh and vice versa.

For trekking in Ladakh to be a rewarding experience it is not enough to be in top physical condition; trekkers must also be extremely well prepared to face the rigors of back country travel.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

The climatic requirements given under Zanskar in the text hold true for this section. Additional clothing could include items like balaclava, gloves, wind parkha, rain gear and insulated ground pad. Trekkers are advised to carry as much of their own food as possible though some supplies may be bought at villages along the way. Remember Ladakh is a harsh land where most people cannot afford to sell valuable stocks of grain set aside for the long winter.

#### Trek 1

##### LEHINWAN—PANIKHAR—RANGDUM—HENASKUT

Lehinwan-Inshan, 16 km  
Inshan-Humpet -Humpet-Kanital, 13 km  
Kanital-Lonvilad Gali, 11 km  
Lonvilad Gali base-Chelong Nallah, 6 km  
Chelong Nallah-Panikhar, 16 km  
Panikhar-Parkachik, 22 km  
Parkachik-Gulmatongo, 22 km  
Gulmatongo-Rangdum, 20 km  
Rangdum-Rusgogdo, 5 hrs  
Rusgogdo-Kanji la base, 6 hrs  
Kanji la base-Kanji, 4 hrs  
Kanji-Henaskut

#### Trek 2

##### PADUM-MANALI

Padum-Muney/Raru (3900m), 20 km  
Raru-Surley (4100m), 22 km  
Surley-Cha-Phugtal-Purney (3900m), 20 km  
Purney-Drangze, 20 km  
Drangze-Karghyak-Gombo-Rangjon-Lartsa, 19 km  
Lartsa-Shingkun la (5100m)-Gadi Shisa, 17 km  
Gadi Shisa-Camp, 15 km  
Darcha-Manali (by bus), 7 hrs

#### Trek 3

##### PADUM-OMASI LA-KISHTWAR

Padum-Ating, 22 km  
Ating-Huttra, 24 km  
Huttra-Omasi la (5434m)-Buiwas. 17 km

Bujwas-Machail, 10 km  
Machail-Atholi, 13 km  
Atholi-Galar  
Galar-Kishtwar (by bus)

Trek 4

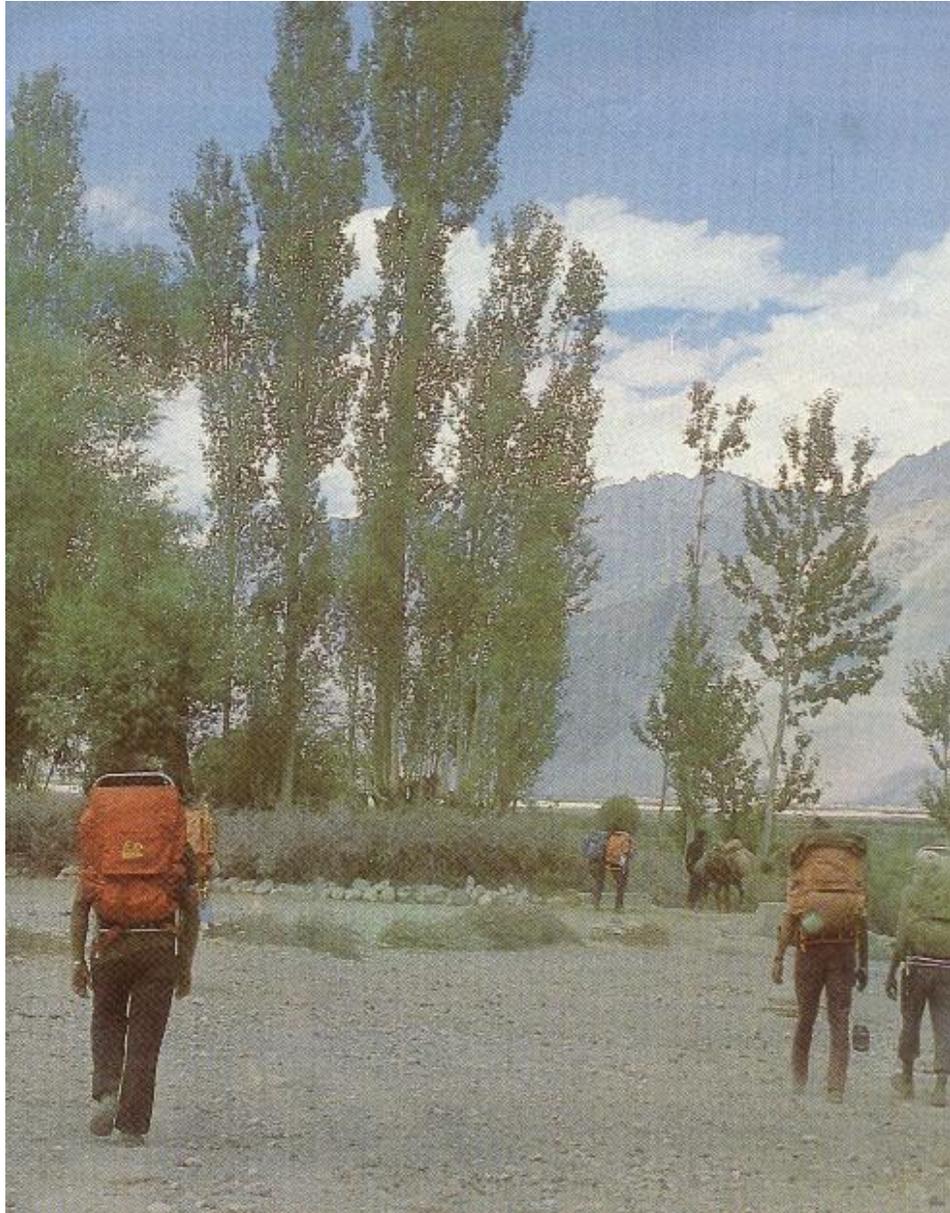
PAHALGAM-PANIKHAR  
Pahalgam-Chandanwari (2923m), 15 km  
Chandanwari-Sheshnag (3658m), 13 km  
Sheshnag-Rangmarg-Humpet, 14 km  
Humpet-Kanital Nallah, 13 km  
Kanital Nallah-Lonvilad Gali (4600m), 11 km  
Lonvilad Gali-Chelong Nallah-  
Panikhar, 22 km

Trek 5

PADUM-LAMAYURU  
Padum-Pishu  
Pishu-Hanamur  
Hanamur-Snertse  
Snertse-Lingshet  
Lingshet-Singey la base  
Singey la base-Singey la (5060m)-Photaksar (3790m)  
Photaksar-Sirsir la (4805)-  
Hanupata (3780m)-Phanjila  
Phanjila-Wanla  
Wanla-Prinkiti la (3726m)-Lamayuru

Trek 6

HEMIS-MARKHA-PADUM  
Hemis-Martselong-Chhogdo, 4 hrs  
Chhogdo-Kongmaru la base (4710m), 4 hrs  
Kongmaru la base-Kongmaru la (5230m)- Nimaling, 3 hrs  
Nimaling-Umlung (3900m), 4 hrs  
Umlung-Thaltak Baho (4450m), 5 hr  
Thaltak Baho-Rebrang la (3900m)- Rebrang, 5 hrs  
Rebrang-Kurma Sumdo (3900m), 4 hrs  
Kurma Sumdo-Tilat Sumdo- Tomto (4150m), 5 hrs  
Tomto- Chhup Chhak(4700), 4 hrs  
Chhup Chhak-Chharchar la (5170m)-Chbarchar la base, 7 hrs  
Chbarchar la base-Zangla, 3 hrs  
Zangla-Padum, 35 km



Trekking enthusiasts in Ladakh

## 10.0 KARGIL

The itinerary of the average tourist to Ladakh usually begins by taking a tour of Leh, the capital and principal township of Ladakh. It invariably ends the sightseeing the monstaries, justly famous, of Shey, Sankar, Phyang, Spituk and Hemis. Some might include Alchi, Likir and Lamayuru. Few if ever trek to interior villages, venture north to Narbu valley or visit the Zanaskar region.

However, the last few years have seen an increase in tourists to the western flank of Ladakh which comprises several valleys. Chief among these are Drass, Suru, Mulbekh and Zanskar. Lying immediately east of the Greater Himalayan wall and drianed and formed by the westmost tributaries of the Indus river, these constitute present-day Kargil district.



Zoji la - the approach to Ladakh

This region once formed part of the erstwhile kingdom of Ladakh. In fact, it was the first to be inhabited by the early colonists of Ladakh - the Indo-Aryan Mons, the Dards of Central Asia and itinerant Tibetans. Also, its valleys, by virtue of their proximity to Kashmir, Kishtwar, Kulu and Gilgit-Baltistan served as the initial receptacle of the cultural waves and ethnic movements that emanated from across the Greater

Himalayan wall. As the area receives abundant water from rivers originating in the Greater Himalaya, the vegetation here is more luxuriant than in eastern Ladakh. The upper Suru valley, in particular, is famous for its extensive alpine grassland which attracts a large number of Bakarwal herdsmen from the Jammu hills.

About 15,000 sq km in area, these valleys sustain an agrarian population of approximately 70,000 people who cultivate the fertile soil mainly available along the course of rivers. The majority is Muslim (Shia faith), Islam having been introduced to them around the middle of the 16th century by missionaries from Kashmir and Baltistan. Their descendants, locally called Aghas, still hold sway, perpetuating their faith in the teeth of ancient folk traditions which speak of a mixed legacy of Buddhism and animism. Many folk traditions, particularly those connected with various stages in the agricultural cycle, are still followed by the people with subdued reverence.

The land approach to Ladakh is the 434 km Srinagar - Leh highway (Kargil falls en route). For most of the way, this road follows the traditional trade route between Srinagar and Leh, thus giving modern travellers a glimpse of villages which are historically and culturally important. The most dramatic part of the bus journey to Kargil is the ascent up the Zojila or Zoji pass, the gateway to Kargil district.

Several outfitters based in India and abroad organize long treks in the region. Mountaineering expeditions to Nun-Kun peaks are catching on. Equally enthusiastic is the response of students with an interest in social anthropology.

Kargil (2740m), 204 km from Srinagar, is the second largest town of Ladakh. It is also the headquarters of our destination, the district of Kargil. A quiet town today Kargil was once witness to the most hectic bartering among traders of different faiths and nationalities. Hundreds of caravans carrying silks, ivory, carpets and precious stones to and from China, Turkey, Yarkand, Afghanistan and India, passed through the town. Several caravanserais, now rendered dangerous due to years of disuse, can be seen in and around Kargil. Substitute travellers for traders and Kargil's position as a resting place remains unaltered. Tourists to Leh by road make a night halt at Kargil before starting on the second leg of the journey.

Kargil town lies in the lower Suru basin. Two other rivers that meet here are Drass and Wakha Chu. Visible all around are lush green fields of barley and wheat, vegetable beds and rows of poplars and willows. Kargil is famous for its apricots and mulberries. June presents a rare sight of fragrant white apricot blossoms while in August, the ripening fruit lends the countryside an orange hue.

### WHAT TO SEE

In Kargil, one can see some of the finest examples of Turkish architecture. Day-long excursions can be taken to Mulbekh or to the Suru valley to observe the grandeur of the Himalayan range from close quarters. The evening can be spent profitably by walking along the river. The ancient fort bridge across it gives a splendid view of the tiered and terraced township sweeping down the hillside.

A stroll in the ancient bazaar might lead to a shop selling attractive flint and tobacco pouches, travelling hookahs and brass kettles - handcrafted items of everyday use which find their way into the mart as curios. Pashmina shawls, cloth paintings using Buddhist themes and symbols, and turquoise can be bought here at bargain prices. And who knows, perchance, you may brush shoulders with one of the Minaros (or Brokpas), a tribe that claims descent from the army of Alexander of Macedonia.

### EXCURSIONS

Situated 45 km east of Kargil on the road to Leh, Mulbekh (3230m) is a typical Buddhist village. The village and the surrounding valley take their name from a small watercourse which originates in the Zaskar range and meets the Suru river at Kargil. Many monuments of the early Buddhist era dot the landscape and are accessible from the village.

**Mulbekh Chamba:** The chief attraction of Mulbekh is a 9-metre rock sculpture in deep relief of Maitreya, the Future Buddha. Its execution combines esoteric Shaivite symbolism and early Buddhist art. Situated bang on the highway, it dates back to the period when Kashmiri Buddhist missionaries came travelling east of the Himalaya.

**Mulbekh Gompa:** Perched atop a rocky cliff, the Mulbekh gompa (monastery) dominates the valley. It is easy to see why in bygone times this site served as an outpost to guard the caravan route. Like all monasteries it is adorned by frescoes and statues.

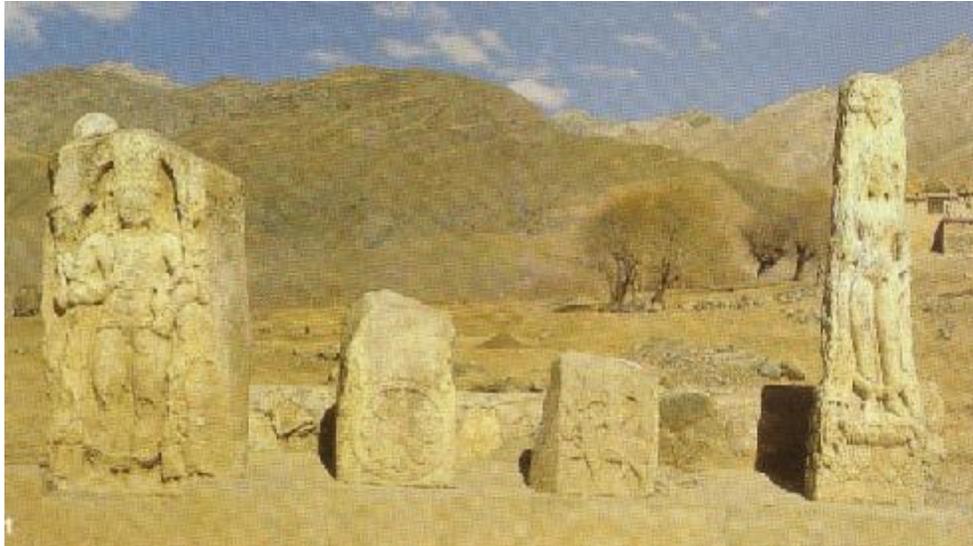
**Shergole:** This is a small village (5 km short of Mulbekh) right of the Wakha brook on the Kargil-Leh road. Visible from afar as a white speck against the brown granite, the monastery here literally hangs out of a cliff.

**Urgyan Rzung:** This is a meditational retreat tucked away behind an amazing natural mountain fortress. Concealed inside is a green circular valley with a monastic establishment at its centre. The hillsides reveal caves where high ranking Buddhist saints perform penance in isolation. The only approach is a footpath laid through a narrow gap in the rocky ramparts.

## 11.0 DRASS

A small township 60 km short of Kargil on the Srinagar - Leh highway, Drass (3230m) is reputed to be the second coldest inhabited place in the world. Temperatures often plummet to - 40°C in winter. Summers, however, are balmy when many hikers and campers visit Drass.

Its inhabitants are of the Dard stock, an Aryan race believed to have originally come from Central Asia. They are a hardy people enduring with fortitude the harsh winter in Drass. An ancestral sport played by the Dards with particular zeal resembles our modern- day polo. An encounter with the locals provides an opportunity to study their lifestyle.



Sculpture near Drass

A short three-day trek from Drass across gently sloping verdant hills leads to Suru valley, terminating in the village of Sankoo.

## 12.0 SURU VALLEY

This is a fertile valley of immense beauty. Its composite population of 25,000 of Tibeto-Dard descent are Muslims who converted their Buddhist faith around the 16th century. The farthest part of the valley consists of a picturesque alluvial pan towered over by the lofty Nun (7135m) and Kun (7035m) peaks. The green hillsides of the Suru valley are a contrast to the awesome Himalayan glaciers, notably Parkachik and Shafaat, which descend from their high anchor in the Nun-Kun massif down to the bed of the Suru in riverine formations.



Suru Valley with the Nun-Kun massif in the background

### WHAT TO SEE

**Sankoo:** A bowl-shaped expanse, this is a small township 40 km south of Kargil. It has the appearance of a man-made forest of poplars, willows and myricarea. Verdant hill slopes are offset by sheer rocky mountainsides and snowy summits. The architecture of the Imambaras and mosques here, is a blend of Turkish and Tibetan styles. Sankoo is also the base for a four-day trek to Mulbekh and a three-day trek to Drass. In a side valley, about 5 km from the roadhead, Kartse village has a seven-metre tall rock sculpture of Maitreya.

**Panikhar:** Kargil, 67 km, is the base for visiting Panikhar the central area of the valley. A short hike takes one to the Nun view-saddle (3810m) from where a panoramic view of the two peaks and the glacial plateau can be had. Another possibility is to ascend the Sentik ridge above the village of Tangole to approach the glacial plateau. Treks from here lead to Pahalgam (5 days) and Kishtwar (6 days). The Imambaras and mosque at Taisuru near Panikhar, are worth beholding for their architecture.

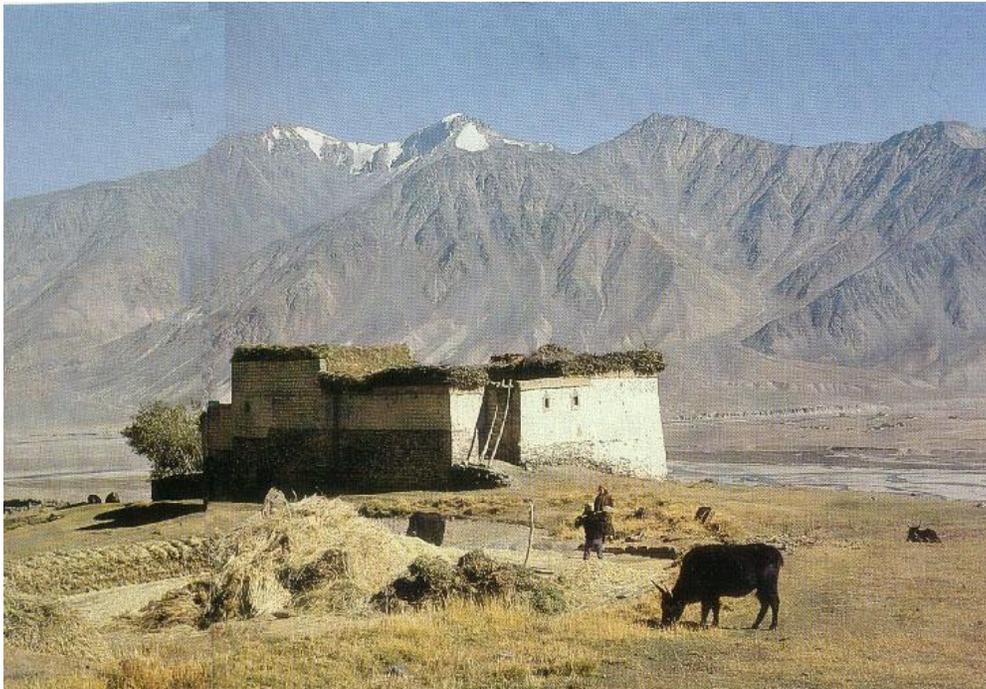
**Rangdum (3657m):** This is an isolated amphitheatre like valley which lies 130 km from Kargil (65 km from Panikhar). Enchanting in its beauty, it has two small hamlets and a monastery that date from the 17th century. The villagers are basically the agricultural serfs of the monastery, which like many other

monasteries is perched on a high hillock. The region is ideal for camping hiking and horse riding. A five-day trek can be undertaken for Henaskut and Lamayuru through the Kanji valley.

## 13.0 ZANSKAR

About 35 km south-east of Rangdum, just across the Penzi la (4390m) watershed, begins the most ravishing of all the trans-Himalayan valleys. Spread over 5,000 sq km, Zanskar has a sparse population of Indo-Tibetan descent. The geographical inaccessibility and the esoteric nature of Buddhism practiced here, gave its inhabitants the freedom to preserve and perpetuate their cultural identity. So that today Zanskar is one of the least interfered with microcosms of Ladakh and one of the last surviving cultural satellites of Tibet.

Within the mountain ramparts of the valley stand some ancient yet active monastic establishments. Close observation of the living conditions evokes admiration for a people who have learnt to live in tune with nature.



A typical rural scene at Zanskar

### WHAT TO SEE

**Padum:** Once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Zanskar, Padum (3505m) is the present-day headquarters of the Zanskar region. The small township clings to a hillock, site of the ruins of the erstwhile palace and fort. Ancient rock carving dating from the 8th century can be seen at the river bank.

There are several monasteries in and around Padum. The one at Stagrimo entails an hour's uphill walk while the one at Pibiting is a magnificent piece of stupa architecture. Believed to have been founded by Kanishka (the ruler of the Kushan dynasty) in the 2nd century, the monastery at Sani is 6 km from Padum.

**Karsha:** The largest and wealthiest of all the monasteries in Zanskar, Karsha has a fine collection of Himalayan art. Its 500-year old frescoes, housed in the Lhabrang, the chamber where teaching is conducted, are in a good state of preservation. The journey to Karsha, which lies on the other side of river Doda, takes two hours on foot. It is also connected by a 17 km long motorable stretch to the Kargil - Padum road.

**Stongdey:** This monastery stands on a rocky outcrop 20 km from Padum. Of particular interest is the Gon Khang or the temple of guardian deities, within the monastery.

**Burdan:** The large assembly hall of the monastery at Burdan, 12 km from Padum (on the route to Manali), houses idols and stupas in clay, bronze, copper and wood.

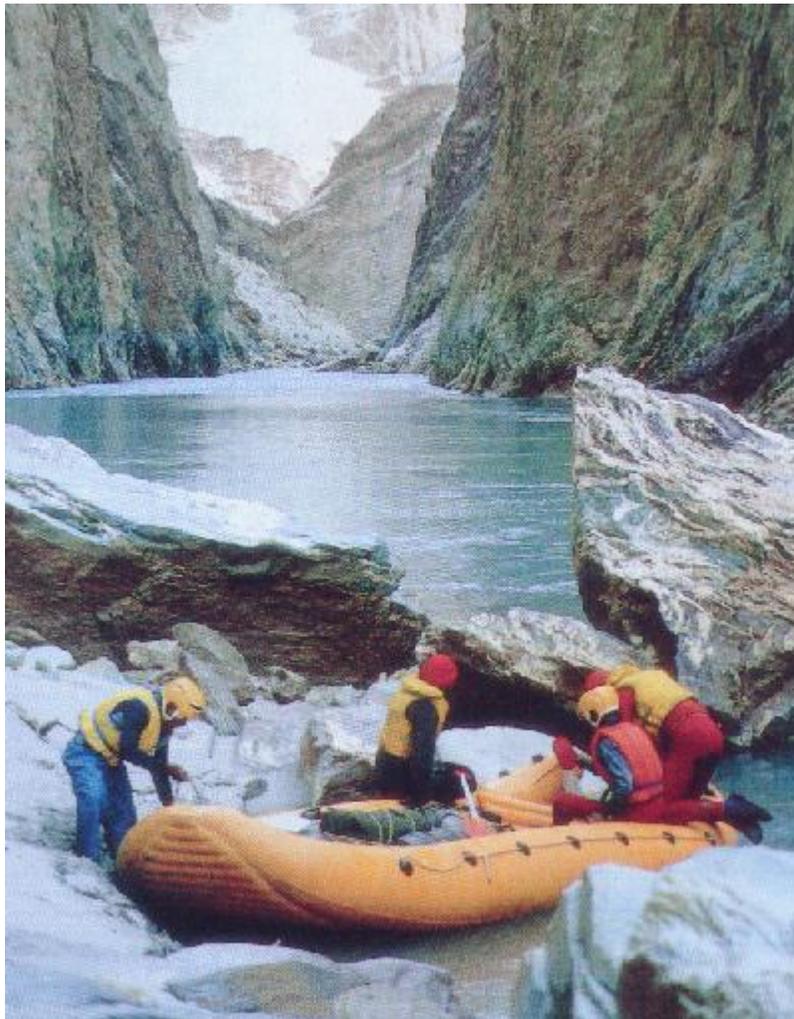
**Zangla:** Lying in the northern arm of Zaskar valley, Zangla, 35 km from Padum, is still ruled by a king. His castle stands sentinel over this isolated mountain community where one can see one of the last remaining suspension bridges - a rare feat of primitive engineering. It takes 5 hours to reach Zangla on horseback and just one by jeep. The village is the take-off point for the Padum - Lamayuru and the Padum - Hemis treks.

**Phugtal:** It is one of the two rare cave monasteries of Zaskar. The monastic complex appears to spill out of the mouth of a huge cave which shelters several temples. Since this is an isolated habitation, an air of mystery hangs over the place. A visit to the monastery and its environs makes a 5-day round trek.

**Zongkhul:** This cave monastery is situated on the Padum-Kishtwar route. Its founding is ascribed to Naropa, the celebrated Indian teacher who lectured in the universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Climatic requirements: In the summer months, early June to end of August, temperatures fluctuate between 5°C and 25°C. A warm day can suddenly get cold thus requiring immediate change of clothing. General items are a woollen pullover, a down jacket (or wind cheater) sturdy boots for walking, a backpack, and a sleeping bag. It is also essential to bring tents if the intention is to travel or trek on your own, and a good quality rucksack (fancy luggage like suitcases are out).



Preparing to run rapids in Zaskar